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Media Minder -- An Interview with Jonathan Miller

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computing is useful since she programmed her own text extractor. Text mining differs from traditional meta-analysis; it is a means for using text in documents to extract contextual and generate synthetic information. This process allows researchers to find suggestions of new promising (not yet definitive) research areas. **Blake** illustrated by describing text mining of the biomedical database **PubMed** to retrieve breast cancer research references with mention of smoking. Text mining requires text, and not all text is “created equal”. The popular PDF format is useless for text mining, particularly when in two column layout. Text mining requires information synthesis across all articles, text, and figures (“orthogonal to information needs”). One-by-one (product) licensing hampers text miners, but publishers want to know the miners’ intent. Text mining is now relatively common practice. **Lamoreaux** highlighted roles for librarians. In new electronic resource contract negotiations, ensure a researcher-librarian-publisher dialog. Promote standards in contracts and ensure they don’t contain language explicitly prohibiting text mining. Perpetual access to online content needs to be in a text mining-supportive format.

Observing Student Researchers in their Native Habitat —

Presented by **John Law** (Director, Strategic Alliances and Platform Management, ProQuest CSA), **Susan Gibbons** (Associate Dean, Public Services & Collection Development, University of Rochester)

Reported by: **Angela Kleinschmidt** (SLIS Student, University of South Carolina)

This was a heavily attended presentation, possibly because it was

mentioned in a plenary session earlier that day. The two presenters, one from **ProQuest** and another from the **University of Rochester**, both studied student research techniques. The **ProQuest** researchers found that students became very attached to using one aggregator, whether or not that product was the ideal one for the topic they were researching, but that they would use a more appropriate search engine if they were more aware of what the library offered and could successfully navigate the Website. The study also debunked the myth that students are using **Google** as their primary research tool. The study found that most students used **Google**, but only as a handy look-up tool to define a word or check a fact, or as a way to get to a known site, such as a newspaper or corporate site. Overall, the students expected to find more factual and useful information from the scholarly journals.

The **University of Rochester** researched student habits before re-designing their library. The team found out that students wanted comfortable furniture that they could easily rearrange to meet their needs. They also found out how important parent interaction was, and they incorporated a parent brunch into student orientation in order to familiarize parents with the resources available. The audience asked many questions after the presentation, including whether the librarians did follow-up to find out how students liked the new library. **Gibbons** said that they hadn’t, but she did regularly take pictures of the furniture to find out how the students were moving it around. An attendee also wanted to know what the presenters thought about librarians being on **Facebook**. **Gibbons** encouraged it, and she suggested joining the network for the incoming freshman class. **Law** was not as enthusiastic, pointing out that students do not look at **Facebook** as a research tool. 🌱

*That’s all the reports we have room for in this issue, but we do have more reports from the 2007 Charleston Conference. Watch for them in upcoming issues of **Against the Grain**. You may also visit the **Charleston Conference Website** at www.katina.info/conference for additional details.*

Media Minder — An Interview with Jonathan Miller

President, First Run/Icarus Films (FRIF)

Column Editor: **Philip Hallman** (Ambassador Books and Media) <philip@absbook.com>

Column Editor’s Note: *Ambassador Media has partnered with hundreds of non-print media distributors since 1994 and provided hundreds of thousands of titles to academic libraries across the globe. This one-stop shopping approach, that includes collection development services as well as cataloging and shelfready processing, has benefited both the libraries and the distributors and, in the process, has eased the time and energy it takes to receive an order from a faculty member, to the point of putting the item on the shelf.*

*When I was asked to take on the regular column, **Media Minder**, for **Against the Grain**, I envisioned it as an opportunity to showcase the point of view of a library media jobber and to point out to the various other communities within the library world the similarities and differences among us. I see it as a forum that will feature an assortment of op-ed type concerns facing all of us in media-land, as well as interviews and profiles of leading individuals and companies within our community. There is no better person to begin the interview portion of this column with than **Jonathon Miller**, President of **First***

***Run/Icarus Films**. For more than twenty years he has provided quality films that stand out from the crowd. — PH*

Philip Hallman: *I became familiar with **First Run/Icarus Films** in 1988. When did the company start and what has your role been in the company? Have you always been the President? Did you start the organization?*

Jonathan Miller: The company started in 1987 when **Icarus Films** (founded in 1977) and **First Run Features** (founded in 1978) merged their non-theatrical divisions to form a new company, and, yes, I have been the president of the company since it was established.

PH: *Did you work with either **Icarus** or **First Run** prior to the merger?*

JM: Yes, I was president of **Icarus Films** from 1980 and had worked there from 1978, a few months after a classmate of mine from college had started it. He and I were the only employees for several years.

PH: *What kind of background do you have? Perhaps business? Film studies or production background?*

JM: I went to NYU and studied film production. I made a film (which we still distribute) called “Tighten Your Belts, Bite The Bullet,” which was in the **NY Film Festival** in 1981.

I had worked for another film distribution company from 1976 to 1978.

PH: *As we talk, the people of New Hampshire are going to the polls to help decide the next President of the United States. So, at this moment, we are focusing on politics and its impact on our lives. Do you think that films can make a difference? Can they really impact the way a student perceives a situation? Have faculty reported back to you how showing one of the films in your collection has changed a student or led to some kind of change?*

JM: No, I do not recall receiving such a report. While I like to think that such things take place, and I am sure they do, I don’t make such a cause and effect assumption about the weight of what we do. I do think it is a more general thing: like being some small part of the evolution of a culture.

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PH: I'm wondering if you can tell our readers how you go about acquiring the titles you have in the collection? I'm sure it's different for each individual distributor, but how do you do it? Do you attend various film festivals? Word of mouth? Over the transom submissions?

JM: I go to four or five events each year, the most important of which is the international documentary film festival in Amsterdam (www.idfa.nl). I also go to an event in April in Cannes called MIP and MIPDOC, I go to Hot Docs in Toronto, sometimes I go to other festivals such as Cinema du Reel in Paris, Sundance, Berlin, etc.

Then I also often get films from international sales agents and distributors — companies that represent producers or TV networks and sell their films for them overseas, e.g., there is a French company called Doc & Co and they sell French films internationally, www.doc-co.com — there are maybe 10-20 such companies I regularly get films from.

Finally, yes, there are filmmakers and producers who approach us and ask to submit their films to us to consider, and we always have more DVDs and tapes on hand to view then we are able to work our way through.

PH: When you are watching these films, what are some of the questions that go through your mind to help determine if there will be a fit with your company? Is it topic alone? Are technical elements taken into account?

JM: The first is: do I like it, am I interested or am I getting bored. If I get through the entire film, then maybe. Secondly, I have to either love the film or have some idea of who will use it, or, ideally, both.

Yes, I care about how a film looks and I try not to take films that are non polished, at least when they don't need to be polished. i.e., in some cases it is entirely appropriate, but in lots of cases not.

I have to be and stay engaged with the film, that's the main criterion, and figure I won't lose too much money.

PH: Are deals worked out individually or do you have a standard agreement to retain a film and distribute it for a specific period of time regardless of how well it does?

JM: Each film has a separate contract with the producer or sales agent who controls the US rights to the film. The contracts are for different terms (number of years) and give us the exclusive rights to the film during that time, regardless (in most cases) of how well the films do. The financial terms of the contracts vary. All of them, however, have us pay a percentage of our receipts from the film to the producer as a royalty. We also usually pay something upfront, plus the expenses of releasing the film, advertising it, and our overhead.

PH: Can we talk a little bit about pricing? I'm sure you are asked all the time, but can you explain why your films are priced in the

100s of dollars whereas other distributors, such as PBS, can charge below \$100.00? Can you talk a little bit about the various price tiers?

JM: Not sure if I have a good answer for this. For one thing, we are not a non-profit. PBS (and, for example, California Newsreel) are. So we pay taxes (Sales tax and income tax) which they do not. We do not get a non-profit discount on bulk mail from the post office. Secondly PBS Video gets a big free ad on TV each time one of their films is shown on PBS. Most of our films are never shown on television. We also distribute — on the whole, on average I think — more esoteric films than they do, which do not sell 1,000 copies each, for example.

PH: What about discounts? The print publishers have driven it so deeply in librarians' minds that they look to video distributors for the same thing. Can you do it?

JM: We sometimes do give discounts, particularly when a customer is buying a large number of videos/DVDs.

PH: Is it an advantage or a disadvantage to be "the high priced guy?"

JM: That's a great question. I sort of like the idea, in a perverse sort of way, but really I have no idea. Wish I did. You tell me! (I can tell you that in 30 years we have never RAISED any of our prices, and that our sales go up almost every year, so while I keep expecting to see a reason to change strategy and cut prices, it hasn't been forced upon us, and I do sort of like to think we have the BEST films (!) so why not charge for them? (A premium product at a premium price?))

PH: In 1994, you began a relationship with Ambassador Media and allowed Ambassador to act as a sub-distributor for your materials. What role do you see Ambassador playing in the fulfillment of your materials to academic libraries?

JM: It is really a service to the academic libraries, because many of them prefer to rely on one source to purchase thousands of individual titles from a myriad of distributors.

PH: I noticed that you have begun a project called "The Global Film Initiative." Can you tell us about that and what they gain by becoming part of it?

JM: No, that isn't our project, it is a project in its own right: www.globalfilm.org.

PH: One use of the VIDEOLIB discussion group is to use it as a source for finding titles that are no longer in distribution. Why do films go out of distribution? Once you drop a title, does a distributor have any responsibility for it in terms of letting people know what might have become of the film?

JM: Usually we only drop a film when the contract expires (say, after ten years) and the producer wants us to stop. Very rarely do we drop a film of our own volition.

PH: One of the trends within library collection

development departments has been a focus on promoting and understanding the cultural diversity that exists within this country. What part in that do you feel FRIF has played?

JM: A small one? We certainly hope to distribute films that are representative of that diversity; we are interested in that. At the same time, so are a lot of other people, so there are any number of other sources for films in that area, e.g., NAATA etc.

PH: Do you have an advisory board of any kind? If so, does it have faculty or librarians on it?

JM: No, just me. But that wouldn't be a bad idea.

PH: Once upon a time, we used NICEM, The Video Source book and printed catalogs to find out what distributors had for sale. Today, I see that you are a part of the database DocuSeek and that you also have a Facebook page to help promote your business. Have you had success in those endeavors and do you foresee any future trends for promotion? Is print reference dead?

JM: We are still producing print mailings, postcards, and thematic catalogs, but we have not printed a comprehensive catalog of our entire collection since 2000. We created DocuSeek together with Bullfrog Films and it now has, I think, eight companies on it. We would like to expand it. However, right now Bullfrog and FRIF are working to transform or create a DocuSeek 2.0 which will be the digital delivery site for both of our collections. Hopefully, that will happen by Sept 2008. As for whether or not DocuSeek has been "successful," I don't know. I know we get a small amount of traffic from it, as do the other companies, but I don't think very many people actually use it very often — what do you think? What do your readers think, do they use it? Is it useful?

PH: Speaking of trends, it seems that digitizing titles and streaming them over the Web is the future. What plans does your company have in that direction?

JM: Yes, we agree. See previous answer.

PH: What's the greatest change you've seen in your more than 20 years of working in this business?

JM: Good question. There is more of everything: more film students, more film festivals, more TV channels, more films, more formats, more ways to promote and market a film, more ways to use a film, more competition, more customers and film users,

PH: Finally, how do you get such a good sales staff? They are knowledgeable, friendly, helpful and some of them have become friends of mine over the years.

JM: Well that's very nice of you to say. I'm glad. I hope this has been of some use to all of you. Please feel free to ask me any other questions you may have or to expand on any of these above which you think deserve it. 

